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On the Universality of Belief in God, and in a Future State.

By the Rev. F. W. Farrar, M.A.

"Es ist ein seltsamer Irrthum, anzunehmen, dass alle Völker an das Dasein eines Gottes glauben; ich habe viele Wilde gesehen, die davon keinen Begriff hatten."
De Lauture.

Whether or not all nations believed in a God, was a question debated even by the ancients. On the one hand, Artemidorus* and Plutarch† positively assert that there was no race without this belief; on the other hand, the Phlegyes, Nasamones, Callaici, Akrothoi,‡ and others, are expressly charged with such ignorance, and Cicero§ pointedly affirms his belief in the existence of such people.

In modern times it has generally been *assumed* that there is no doubt about the matter, and such a consensus of the whole human race has even been most needlessly inserted among the certain evidences of religion. But what are the facts? If we may believe the testimony of travellers,—*who are generally prejudiced in the opposite direction*, and who frequently implant their own belief, which is found there by subsequent voyagers—there are not only isolated tribes, but whole nations who are so degraded as to live with no knowledge of their Creator.

For instance—1. Of the *Australians*, Mr. Schmidt says, "*They have no idea of a Divine Being*," and Mr. Parkes, "That they have no words for justice or for sin;" and Dr. Laing, "They have no idea of a superior Divinity, *no object of worship, no idols, nor temples, no sacrifices*, nothing whatever in the shape of religion to distinguish them from the beasts." Similarly Perty,‖ in describing the aborigines of Solomon's archipelago, says, "that in many of the islands there is no trace of any religion." 2. If we turn to *Africa*, the missionary, J. Leichton, tells us of the *Mpongwes*, that he found among them neither religion nor idolatry; and another missionary, the Rev. G. Brown, tells us of the *Kaffirs*, "That they have not in their language *any word to use as the name, or to denote the being, of a God*—of any God." According to one account, the nearest approach to it appears to be the word *Tixo*, which means "wounded knee," and was the name of a celebrated medicine-man a few generations back! The natives of Cape Mount, when questioned by Smith about their religion, said, they obeyed their chiefs, and troubled themselves about nothing higher. A Bosjesman, when asked the difference between good and wicked, said, "It was good to steal another person's wife, and wicked when one's own wife was stolen." Respecting Fetishism in general, which is the prevalent religion (?)

* Οὐδὲν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων ἄθεον. Artemid., i, 9.

† Ἀνιέρου δὲ πόλεως καὶ ἀθέου . . . οὐδείς ἐστιν οὐδ' ἔσται γεγονὼς θεατής. Plut. Adv. Colot. Epicureum, p. 1124.

‡ See Fabricius, Bibl. Antiq., p. 229

§ "Equidem arbitror *multas* esse gentes sic immanitate efferas, ut apud eas nulla suspicio Deorum sit." Cic. De Nat. Deor., i, 23.

‖ Grundzüge d. Ethn., § 282.

of Africa, Captain Burton* observes, that "it admits *neither God, nor angel, nor devil;* it ignores a resurrection, a *soul or a spirit,* a heaven or a hell." Of the Kaffirs the missionary Scultheiss† also says, that "they have no religion, never pray, know nothing of a higher Being, and believe only in the existing life." 3. Of the *Malagache,* Rochon‡ says, "The Malagache, like the savage, is *destitute alike of virtue and vice;* he is susceptible of no kind of foresight; and he does not conceive that there are men on the earth who give themselves uneasiness respecting futurity." 4. Of the *Esquimaux,* Whitebourne,§—whose testimony is valuable because he wrote in 1612, and before they could have learnt of God from more frequent intercourse with Europeans—says, "*They had no knowledge of a God,* and lived under no form of civil government." And even Sir J. Ross¶ observes, "That they have a moral law of some extent written in the heart I could not doubt, as numerous traits of their conduct show; but beyond this *I could satisfy myself of nothing.*" 5. Of the *Mincopies* or *Andamaners,*** Dr. Mouat says, "They have no conception of a Supreme Being,—no conception of a Cause, and are not even polytheists. One of them who was taken captive said that his countrymen 'had no kind of worship, not even the most gross, being entirely ignorant of the being and nature of a God.'" 6. Finally, of the *Veddahs* of Ceylon, Sir J. Emerson Tennent†† does not hesitate to say, "They have no religion of any kind,—*no knowledge of a God or of a future state;* no temples, idols, altars, prayers, or charms." Mr. Bailey, long a resident among them, confirms this judgment, "They have no knowledge of a Supreme Being! 'Is he on a rock? on a white ant-hill? on a tree? I never saw a God,' was the only reply I received to repeated questions. They have no idols, offer no sacrifices, and pour no libations."

It is probable that these testimonies might by further search be largely multiplied; but if not, they are alone amply sufficient to set the question at rest, and to prevent the repetition of that which is, on the best interpretation, very questionable. We need not, therefore, weaken them by cases like that of the Diggers, who, because they consider the world to have been made by a large capote, and the sun by a cunning rabbit, are supposed to believe in a superior Intelligence! A vague fear of the Unknown is found even among animals, and is widely different from the belief in a God. At the same time, everyone would rejoice if the testimonies here adduced could be impugned by trustworthy evidence.

It is not necessary to say anything about the supposed world-extensive belief in a future state. It is absurd to say that such a belief *can* be general among all nations, when it is now all but universally admitted that it was a belief at the best but *very darkly*

* Personal Advent. in South Africa, p. 12.

† Lake Regions of Central Africa; Schultheiss, in Perty, Grundzüge d. Ethn., § 274.

‡ Voyage to Madagascar, Pinkerton, xvi, 241.

§ See Pouchet, De la Plur., ch. v, pp. 90-115.

¶ Second Voyage, p. 548.

** Adventures among the Andamaners, pp. 14, 303.

†† Ceylon, ii, 441.

revealed even to the ancient Jews* themselves before the captivity; and that when they did learn it, they continued to assign *total annihilation* to those who denied the resurrection and the judgment. The Scriptures themselves teach us that it was Christ, and not Moses, who "brought life and immortality to light."

The PRESIDENT said that Mr. Farrar had done great service to anthropology in bringing the subject of the asserted universality of belief in the existence of a God and a future life before the Society. He had stated many facts which deserved to be more noticed than they have been; for the universal belief in the existence of a supreme Creator had been generally assumed. This was so much the case that at a meeting of the Sydney Philosophical Society much surprise was excited when the question was raised whether it was true that the aborigines of Australia had no notions of a God. The question was examined into, and the assertion of Mr. Laing to that effect was pronounced to be perfectly correct. In Victoria, indeed, it was found that the natives entertained a notion of a good and a bad spirit, but Victoria was a small district, and the evidence on the subject obtained there afforded no real answer to the assertion of Mr. Laing and others, that there is no universality in the belief of a God. As to the assumed belief in a future life among all tribes of savages, such a notion was quite out of the question if they did not believe in a God. He should be glad to hear evidence on the subject from any gentleman present. The facts stated in the paper were very important, and he should be pleased if any facts could be brought forward on the other side of the question.

Mr. REDDIE said there could be no doubt it was an unfortunate proposition that had been advanced many years ago, that the existence of a God could be proved by the universality of such a belief. There were, doubtless, many degraded nations who had no proper idea of a Supreme Creator; but it was questionable whether all the assertions which travellers had made on this subject were correct; for a great deal of what they represented rested on a very slight foundation. There could be no doubt that, even in our own country, there was great ignorance of religion; and fifteen or twenty years ago a blue book was published, containing the report of the Commissioners on Education, in which it appears that they had found among our own people in the mining districts persons who were totally ignorant of a God. With respect to the assertions of travellers it might be observed, that many of them know so little of the language of the savage races they have visited, that even if they had a belief in a God they would often not know how to express it, or would not be well understood. It was a fact, even in our own country, that many men, women, and children, often gave very lamentable answers to the questions put to them; but these questions (as appears by the Blue Book referred to) were often not very skilfully framed, in language adapted to the common people; and it was very doubtful whether the questions put by travellers, who had but an imperfect knowledge of the imperfect languages of savage

* See Ps. lxxxviii, 10-12; Is. xxxviii, 9-20; Ecl. ix, 5, 6, 10; Job xiv, 19-21; Eccles. xvii, 27, 28, etc.

tribes, were calculated to gather the accurate meaning of the people they addressed. But it would be a false deduction to think that a race of people had always been devoid of the knowledge of a God, because some of them had since sunk to that degraded state. Though a great portion of the statements quoted by Mr. Farrar might be true, yet it was sufficiently apparent from the recent works of travellers—and he referred especially to that of Captain Speke—how little they often used their eyes or their intellects to discover trustworthy facts in their intercourse with the natives; and he ventured to think that much of what travellers had said might be questioned, as merely formed upon inadequate and superficial considerations.

Mr. Louis Fraser said that all the negroes of Africa whom he had seen believed in the existence of a good spirit and of a bad spirit. They did not attend much to the former, because they thought he would do them no harm; but they were in great dread of the latter, and endeavoured to propitiate him.

Mr. Wallace said that when he was among the wild tribes of the Moluccas and of New Guinea, he endeavoured to ascertain what were their ideas respecting the Creator of the universe, but he could only get from them a confession of total ignorance of the subject. It was difficult to distinguish the real opinions of those savages from the opinions that they had heard. If they were told by any traveller that there was an invisible Creator of the universe, so far as they were capable of receiving such an idea they would receive it, and repeat it afterwards when questioned on the subject; but so far as he was able to ascertain, they had no such idea whatever. They had no desire for knowledge, but were contented to go on in their own ways. They have, indeed, some vague ideas of the existence of unknown powers; diseases, for instance, were supposed to be unnatural, and to be caused by some supernatural agency, but that was very different from the belief in a God. The intellectual capacities of those tribes were so feeble, that he doubted whether they could be made to appreciate or understand what was meant by a God. They were unable even to comprehend the simplest relations of numbers, such as the adding of four and five together, or even less quantities, without putting stones before them and showing them the amount visibly. In the same manner, their language contained no general terms. They had names for particular things, but for no classes of things. They had names for particular trees or plants, but they had no names to express the meaning of trees or plants in general.

The Rev. Mr. Kerr expressed great satisfaction at having heard the able paper of Mr. Farrar, for he had often considered that it was a question which deserved careful thought. His own experience in several large parishes in England had taught him that, even in this country, there were many persons who had but little notion of a God. In Liverpool he had found several instances of persons who were occupied in certain kinds of employment who had very little idea of a Supreme Being. In the eastern parts of London also, he had met with several similar instances; and he had no doubt that a great many, even in this Christian country, had no idea of a God. It had been asserted

by Grotius in his work *Religionis Christianæ*, that the idea of a God was general throughout mankind, but his own observations among the heathen at home bore out the remarks of the travellers who had been quoted by the author of the paper.

Mr. T. BENDYSHE observed that two questions had been mixed together in the discussion, which were really quite distinct. It was one question whether there are individuals in any community who have no knowledge of a God; and quite another question whether there were races of men devoid of such knowledge. That there are individuals who are ignorant of the existence of a Supreme Being must be apparent to every one who investigated the subject. He considered it very doubtful whether the Australians, as a race, had any idea of a God. That some individuals among them might have was probable, but that would not negative the assertion of the author of the paper. It had been said by Mr. Reddie that the opinions formed by travellers might be owing to their ignorance of the language of the tribes whom they visited. But there were cases to which that objection would not apply. There was a well authenticated case of a man who was a captive among a savage tribe for thirteen years, who stated that they had no notion of a God, and that statement was made with a full knowledge of the language and of the sentiments of the tribe. It was stated, also, by Captain Speke, that when he asked the king of Uganda whether he believed in the existence of a Supreme Being, he laughed at the idea of such a thing. The prevalence of some superstitions was not sufficient to prove the belief of a God. There was a great distinction to be observed between Fetish practices, and other superstitions of the kind, and the belief in a Supreme Creator. To establish the position of the author of the paper, all that was wanted was the proof of one negative instance. Captain Ross was among the Esquimaux for several months, and the whole of that time he saw no indication of any religious worship. Even among the Chinese, there was no word to express the signification of a Supreme Being, the word God and heaven being synonymous,—so difficult was it for them to conceive the meaning of the word God. Those instances were, he thought, sufficient to prove Mr. Farrar's general proposition.

The Rev. F. W. FARRAR said his object in bringing the subject before the Society was to obtain testimony on one side or the other. He should have been delighted if the opinion he had stated, on the authority of various travellers, had been refuted by other travellers; and that was his main object in bringing the question forward. After all, however, the main assertion in his paper was little more than what was stated in the Bible—that there were people who knew not God. They had, indeed, heard it stated that evening by a London clergyman that even in England there are people living within the sound of church bells who do not know anything of God. That was important evidence, and after that they should not be surprised that in certain parts of the world there are savage tribes who have no belief in a God. All races, probably, have *a fear of the unknown*, but a similar feeling exists among animals, as may be proved by many well-authen-

ticated instances, some of which have been adduced by Prof. Carl Vogt. Of course, it was well known that *individuals* in all nations were unfortunately to be found who had no belief in a God. Even among the Greeks, there were some who avowed their disbelief in an invisible Creator of the universe. It was a verification of the maxim that extremes meet, to observe the strong intellect of cultivated men arrive at the same conclusion as the most degraded types of humanity.

The following paper was next read:

On Hybridity. By the Rev. F. W. Farrar, M.A.

We hope in the following paper to adduce some evidence in favour of two propositions, viz.:

I. That it is erroneous to assume that the fertility of hybrids furnishes a decisive proof of the unity of species; and

II. That it is as yet premature to assert that the union of all varieties of the human race produces an offspring continuously fertile.

I. Of course if we choose to define species in a conventional way, and consistently abide by our definition, we may apply the term to all varieties which are capable of producing between themselves a fertile offspring. But then it is a mere playing with words to assert that the intermixture of all human races is "eugenesic", and then to say that we have, in any valuable sense, proved the unity of the human species; on the contrary, we have merely been reasoning in a vicious circle, and misusing philosophical terms. If, again, we could prove that all races of men can produce by intercourse a *continuously* fertile offspring, we should prove that fact,—and it is an interesting one,—but we should prove *nothing more*. We should still leave absolutely untouched the question of their origin from a single pair.

The definition of species, which makes it depend on the fecundity of cross-breeds, is very open to attack. Fruitful hybrids have been produced between animals whose common origin cannot for a moment be assumed. The repulsion supposed to exist between different races of animals is occasionally* overcome, though not so easily as in the case of men. Positive experiment has proved that the wolf† and hound, hound and fox, camel and dromedary, goat and sheep, goat and steinbock, horse and ass, are severally capable of producing fertile offspring. But does any one venture seriously to assert that these classes of animals must therefore have severally originated from single pairs? Yet if not, it is absurd, on the assumption of similar grounds, to make such an assertion in the case of man. Besides, as Vogt justly remarks, what we call species is merely an abstraction from individuals; and, similarly, fruitful intercourse, as a character of species, is merely an abstraction derived from the observation of a comparatively few individual cases.

The remarks of Agassiz‡ on this whole subject are so weighty and

* Jessen, Ueber die Lebensdauer. Bonn, 1855.

† See on the whole subject, Broca, Sur l'Hybridité; C. Vogt, Köhlerglaube und Wissenschaft, § 68; and Bulletins de la Soc. de l'Anthrop., Apl. 1860, where the whole subject is ably discussed by MM. Broca, Boudin, De Quatrefages, etc.

‡ Provinces of the Animal World, Types of Mankind, p. lxxv.